

Smackdown In the Backyard; Professional-Style Wrestling? Not in My Neighborhood

By Elissa Gootman

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Marie Minutillo's front lawn is classic suburbia. The grass is neatly trimmed and a stone deer, flanked by small American flags, basks in the shade of a delicate cherry tree.

But oh, that backyard.

Last summer, Ms. Minutillo thought it would be a good idea to surprise her son, John Femenella, with a 16-by-16-foot professional-style wrestling ring, a gift for his 17th birthday. The ring cost \$6,000 -- a hefty investment, she figured, but a great way to keep him occupied and close to home while helping him realize his dream of becoming a professional wrestler.

The neighbors, however, did not agree.

"All we hear is cursing and boom, bam, boom," said Patricia Rodriguez, a high school hall aide who lives two doors down from Ms. Minutillo's home on Tremont Road here, in the Town of Babylon. "Where's the quality of our life?"

Mrs. Rodriguez grew so fed up with the grunts and thumps of the young wrestlers, and the cheers and curses of their friends on the sidelines, that one Saturday in December she videotaped the spectacle from her bedroom window. She took the video, including shots of flips, choke-slams and a "Star Wars"-style duel in which two wrestlers whisk out what look like fluorescent light bulbs and then appear to smash them on each other, and dropped it off at Town Hall.

Now, the Town of Babylon is considering banning backyard wrestling rings (boxing rings, too). The proposal, which the town board could vote on as early as tonight, has cast Ms. Minutillo's ring as a flashpoint in a distinctly suburban battle over where one person's property rights end and the neighbors' right to peace and quiet begin.

"What are they going to do, come into our basements now and tell us what we can do?" asked Eric I. Prusan, Ms. Minutillo's lawyer, who is fighting the proposal on the grounds that it would violate the rights of free speech and assembly. "Nobody gets in the ring unless they're properly prepared. I found it a great way for the kids to congregate without causing any pain, any trouble."

In recent years, backyard wrestling has become something of a mini-phenomenon among suburban youth reared on the antics of the World Wrestling Federation. Town officials said they had not found evidence of similar bans elsewhere, although the man who sold Ms. Minutillo her ring said a customer in New Jersey had to return his, after being told it violated zoning codes.

Twice the board has postponed the vote, most recently two weeks ago, after about two dozen teenagers and early 20-somethings showed up at Town Hall to protest the ban.

"The Taliban, they banned sports in the country of Afghanistan," said Ryan Perry, 18, the lanky president of the Xtreme Wrestling Alliance, which meets in a lesser ring in Joe Liantonio's backyard in North Babylon. "If you want to ban this, you're similar to the Taliban regime."

He likened wrestling to Elvis Presley, another phenomenon that adults just did not get initially.

"Rock 'n' roll is now commonly accepted," Ryan pointed out, adding that

backyard wrestling was not so much a sport as an art form. "If it looks like we're hurting ourselves," he said, "that means our form of entertainment, our drama, our acting, is that much better."

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Board member Wayne R. Horsley, who drafted the bill after watching the videotape, was not swayed. "They hit each other over the head with chairs," he said, "and they smack each other with fluorescent light bulbs and it scatters across the backyard."

Even so, he acknowledged being moved by the pleadings of the young wrestlers. "Frankly, the young people are compelling, because no one likes to be against young people in a backyard effort," he said.

For John Femenella, a.k.a. Jonny TNT, who heads what he calls the Amateur Wrestling Association, wrestling is more than a hobby. "It's just something I'm born to do," he said during practice one recent afternoon, his 250-pound frame sheathed in a gray T-shirt, shiny black leggings and baggy shorts. Ms. Minutillo recalled how her son ripped apart his T-shirt as a child, crying, "Hulk Hogan!"

"I knew, oh, that was it, wrestling is in his life," she recalled, watching the practice after returning from work as a mortgage underwriter.

She beams watching John pounce on the mat with a loud thud, taking down an opponent who miraculously gets right back up, unscathed.

"You have to work a crowd and know the moves," she said. "And he does it all." Ms. Minutillo said she was not particularly worried that John would get hurt wrestling. She said the new ring was safer than his old one, a makeshift contraption with boards and carpet padding.

"It's safer than a swimming pool, safer than a trampoline," Mr. Prusan, the lawyer, said. "No 3-year-old's going to wander out to a wrestling ring and die."

The drama that regularly unfolds in Ms. Minutillo's backyard is not the stuff

of the high school wrestling team. The moves here have names like "Spanish Fly," "Excalibur" and "T-Bomb," John's signature move, in which one wrestler pushes off another's shoulder, then they both fall to the ground, with one's legs straddling the other's body.

Mrs. Rodriguez's video depicts a more elaborate production, in which wrestlers appear to bash one another with a folding chair and send their friends crashing into wooden boards. A young man hangs his opponent upside down from his knees on the ring's highest rope, the better to assault him with a metal garbage can.

Mr. Prusan has instructed John and his friends to refrain from using props and cursing. The violence, he said, is not real but staged; the folding chair is padded and not actually used to strike anyone.

But for Danielle and Michael Nucci, who live next door, the illusion, if it is that, is all too real.

The neighbors used to be friendly; Mrs. Nucci even gave Ms. Minutillo a key to her house.

The breaking point came last winter, when Mackenzie Nucci's first birthday party coincided with a wrestling event. The 30 friends and family members who gathered for shrimp cocktail and birthday cake found themselves listening to obscenities blurted over a loudspeaker, said Mrs. Nucci, 27, a lawyer.

"We don't have anything against the wrestling," she said. "It's just not the place for it."

As a single working mother, Ms. Minutillo is thankful for the wrestling. Not everyone, she noted, can say that her 17-year-old son would rather be nowhere than in his own backyard.